THE HINDU
Sunday, March 1, 2026

magazine

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INDIA'S AI RECKONING

More young Indians have embraced generative AI than the global average. Will India's techno-optimism pay off in the long run?

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The recent India AI Impact Summit in Delhi was plagued by publicity nightmares and logistical issues: from Galgotias University parading a Chinese-made robodog as its students' creation (and then getting kicked out of the summit) to frustrated delegates complaining about long lines and traffic, even device theft. There was no shortage of rants on national television and social media.

And yet, Bharat Mandapam, the venue, was full. Half a million people descended on the convention centre and expo halls spread over 123 acres, sending hotel prices across the city skyrocketing. That a first-of-its kind summit, with over 2,000 experts, very few of them big names, commanded crowds so massive says a lot about India's attitude towards Artificial Intelligence (AI).

This enthusiastic optimism for AI, however, is not universal. For instance, in the U.S., which has seen some of the most impressive breakthroughs in large language models (the technology powering AI chatbots such as ChatGPT and Gemini), only 17% of people surveyed last year say that they are more optimistic about the tech than cautious. For the American tech executives who lined up at Bharat Mandapam last week, the environment couldn't have been more encouraging: both Jensen Huang of Nvidia and Sam Altman of OpenAI have complained about public hostility to their line of work. That hostility was largely absent last week.

It's easy to see why. Crores of Indians have accessed the web for the first time in the last few years, after mobile phones became affordable to more people and improved Internet bandwidth led to over 800 million individual connections. OpenAI says 10 crore Indians use ChatGPT multiple times a week – for help with writing, learning, coding. And that number is likely to grow.

For hyperscalers such as Amazon, Meta and Microsoft, spending tens or hundreds of billions on AI, this is key to winning the race to Artificial General Intelligence or AGI. AGI is AI that is as good as, or maybe better than, humans at a wide range of tasks. "On our current trajectory, we may only be two years away from early versions of true superintelligence," Altman declared in his keynote address at the Delhi summit.

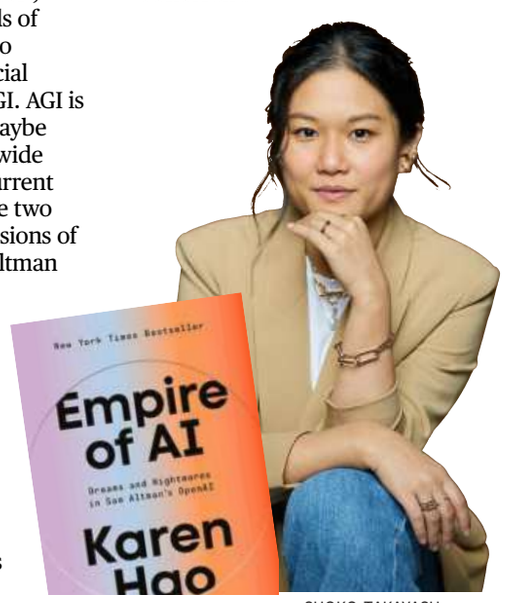
That should give Indians pause. It certainly gave retail investors a shock – when Claude, the LLM developed by AI firm Anthropic, released its Opus 4.6 model, IT stocks in India crashed. At the summit, Infosys and TCS tried their best to paper over those shocks by entering into agreements with OpenAI and Anthropic. Soon, that may not be enough.

AI is already incredibly capable. A day before the summit, I installed Claude (belatedly, since it took a while for the $24 monthly price tag to make sense). As I tinkered around the first LLM that I dared to give access to my PC, I was able to develop little tools to jerry rig integrations that I have wished forever would exist – like a simple alert system for government gazette notifications. Claude just hammered together all the components it needed for the job. If I were a coder, I'd be able to do so much more with it.

No wonder IT stocks fell. But the real crash hasn't arrived yet. At the summit, during a quick chat with OpenAI's chief economist Ronnie Chatterji, he told me, "We're not seeing a huge impact, let's say, on unemployment rates around the world because of AI yet. Part of that is because, I think, people are still learning how to use it. They're using it for a lot of positive value. Enterprises are figuring it out."

Risks and guardrails

What happens once people get better at using AI? At Synapse, the annual tech conclave hosted by journalist Shoma Chaudhury, I speak to Karen Hao, who wrote *Empire of AI* (2025), a deeply sceptical take on Big Tech's motivations as it pumps billions into data centres and LLM training runs. Hao is skeptical of the many definitions of AGI, but she finds the goal behind this push the most abhorrent.



SHOKO TAKAYASU

> **Why are we creating** systems that can replace and make humans duplicative when we could actually just be building technologies that assist them?
>
> **KAREN HAO**
> Author, *Empire of AI*

"I find this project to be fundamentally anti-human," Hao says. "Like, why are we creating systems that can replace and make humans duplicative when we could actually just be building technologies that assist them?" Now that tech firms have spent so much money on LLMs, there is no other way out, she adds. "They have to sell their product as a labour-replacing technology now. That's the only justification for them charging extremely high amounts of money for their services."

India's IT industry employs roughly 1% of the population, but has contributed at its peak to 7% of Gross Domestic Product. If the disruption costs jobs, it robs many of a once-reliable pathway to the middle class. If Indian companies cannot leverage AGI as well as global competitors, the industry will face an existential risk.

At Synapse, I also meet with Stuart Russell, a prominent British academic who has spoken out against autonomous weapons and contributed enormously to AI safety research. AI systems "are already having a serious impact", he says, citing the example of Sewell Setzer III, a 14-year-old from Florida, who died by suicide after developing an attachment to a chat bot on Character AI. On this platform, users can create characters with personalities and parameters of their choice, and then interact with them. For years, researchers have struggled to put infallible guardrails to prevent LLMs from doing things like encouraging suicide or assisting with bomb making, but it has been possible – if not straightforward – to get around these restrictions.

Karandeep Anand, a former Meta executive who joined as CEO of Character AI after Setzer's mother sued the firm for his wrongful death, said at Synapse that it is important to build in safety "right from the very start", and emphasised that companies have to "take a leadership position" on the issue.

Setzer's mother, Megan Garcia, was also at Synapse, and met Anand for the first time in person there.

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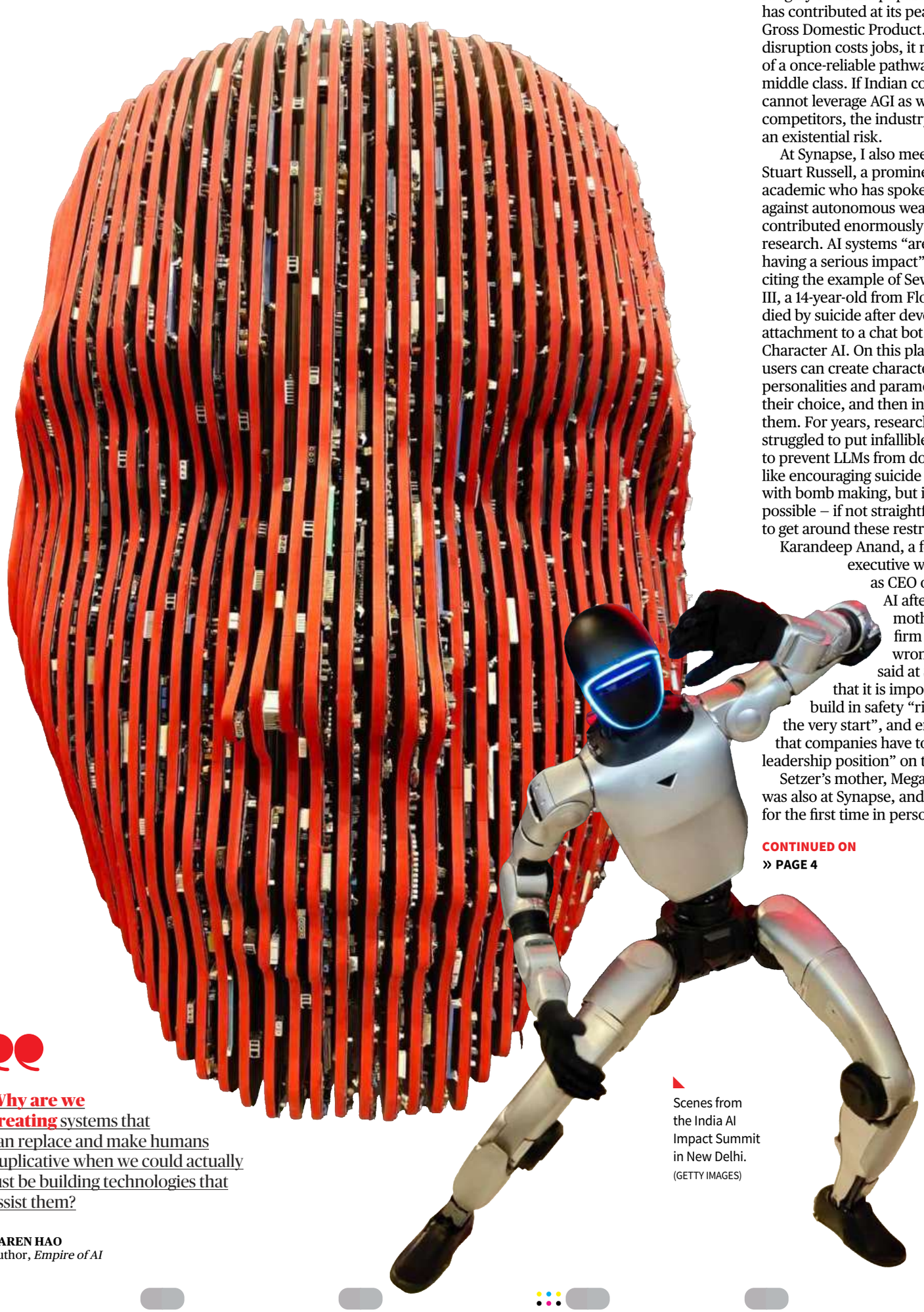
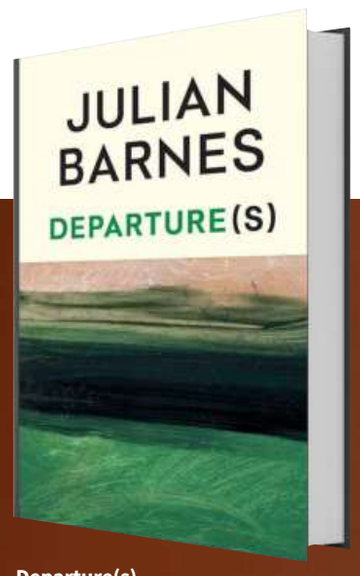


Scenes from the India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi.
(GETTY IMAGES)

THE ART OF LEAVING

Man Booker-winning author Julian Barnes blurs memoir and fiction in this farewell meditation he says is his final book



Departure(s)
Julian Barnes
Jonathan Cape
₹999

Anushree Nande

Departure(s) opens with a narrator, who both is and isn't Julian Barnes (though the latter is also a novelist named Julian Barnes), writing about involuntary autobiographical memory, before declaring, almost casually, that there were "two things to mention at this stage: there will be a story — or a story within the story — but not just yet; this will be my last book."

Over the course of five sections and 150 pages, we are taken through timelines — the 1960s, 2010s, and the more recent pandemic years — and meditations on memory, fallibility, ageing, illness, love, identity, the limitations of language, the nature of the novelist, and of course death, that ultimate, inevitable, departure without subsequent arrival. And as the titular exits unspool, fiction, memoir, and essay blur and meld until it is impossible for the reader to differentiate between fact and figment.

Even the book design and marketing offer nods and winks: the U.S. title is *Departure(s): A Novel,* while the U.K. edition is simply *Departure(s)* with its jacket informing us that it is "a work of fiction — but that doesn't mean it's not true". Not to mention the narrator who writes in turns that "we can and should trust novelists when they tell us the beautiful lies of their fiction" but also that he'd promised never to write about Jean and Stephen and has decided to pseudonymise them here, after their deaths, so, "if I broke that oath, how dependable is my promise to you of authenticity (of the story in question)?"

Mechanics of memory

The promised "story" begins in section two. Stephen and Jean are two fellow Oxford University students and friends whom the narrator was responsible for first introducing sometime around 1964-68 ("you can google that, if you wish," we are told), and reuniting 40 years later. We know from the blurb that the couple will "fall in love when they are young and again when they are old", and are also told at the outset that this is a story with no middle.

What the book does in the middle, in section three sandwiched between the beginning and end of Stephen and Jean's story, is fast forward to the future, when the narrator is diagnosed with a rare blood cancer during the early pandemic (author Barnes himself was diagnosed with myeloproliferative neoplasm in March 2020). In a section that has more levity and humour than one would expect, he discovers that his condition is incurable but manageable ("that sounds like life, doesn't it?") and with a daily chemo pill, his life expectancy is not seriously compromised (so long as he dodges the 5% chance of another mutation).

Even here, his preoccupations are with the mechanics of memory, "that place where degradation and embellishment overlap". In "a demonstration of how memory (and record-keeping) works, and of what gets forgotten as the mind processes its vast input of 'facts' to be stored", he compares: the writing from memory at the section's start, the notes scribbled while in the hospital before receiving the specifics of his diagnosis, the "brief, alarmed" two-and-a-half page notes for what he assumed would be his final book (the "provisionally awful and archly self-pitying" titled *Jules Was*), and finally his diary, which contains the most complete version.

On his own terms

If you aren't used to reading the author, you may question the hybrid nature of this "official departure, (my) final conversation". To which he'd probably reply, just like the narrator when Jean tells him, in true Barnesian meta fashion, that "this hybrid thing" he does is a mistake: "I don't mind you not liking my books, but you are mistaken if you think I don't know exactly what I'm up to when I write them." He would add that he has always believed "form is as important as subject matter".

If nothing else (which is far from true), *Departure(s)* proves that Julian Barnes does know exactly what he's doing. This is a writer still admirably in control of the narrative, wielding words with not just precision and intention (even within the tangents), but also a sharp, playful intellect and an understated charm. If a last hurrah, then it is one very much on his own terms, and at the top of his ability, writing about familiar and long-time concerns.

The reviewer is a Mumbai-based author and editor.

Julian Barnes won the Man Booker Prize in 2011 for the novel, *The Sense of an Ending.* (GETTY IMAGES)

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Crimes of the nation

Anita Nair's new anthology is an attempt to make sense of the socio-political churn in India

Sumana Mukherjee

While discussing the dearth of original crime fiction in India a while ago, a writer friend pointed out that it was a hard challenge to take on the city crime pages of newspapers. From domestic dramas like the body of a past lover hacked and stuffed into a freezer, to be revealed only after a prolonged power cut, to murder at scale as in the Nithari case, urban India, sadly enough, is hard to beat when it comes to violent crime.

Of late, though, that thread of truth being stranger than fiction seems to have escaped the inside pages and emerged onto the headlines. As ancient fractures are consciously widened, dampened fires re-lit and fresh awareness questions the status quo, the country experiences a churn with few precedents.

It is this churn that prolific author Anita Nair seeks to capture in her new anthology, *Why I Killed My Husband and Other Such Stories*. In her preface, Nair attributes her inspiration to crime novelist Ian Rankin's use of the phrase "the state of the nation" in an interview. She writes, "While I had always found crime fiction a great platform for social commentary, I had just stumbled on a new way of seeing the world around us." First released as a series of audio plays, her stories – reworked and expanded – now find new life in these longish short stories (novellas no longer being in fashion).

Risky gamble

Though it might seem like a stretch to describe this collection as 'state of the nation stories', Nair isn't the first to use the genre platform for social commentary and won't be the last. The device works to serve up a fine cross-section of current concerns in India, including misogyny, casteism, religious division and social apathy.

Even at its most basic, fiction allows deep dives beyond the hot takes on Reels, giving space to the author to flesh out characters, colour in motivations and intentions, expound on the consequences and outcomes, and thereby perhaps answer the reader's (or the general public's) perennial question: why do bad things happen?

Consider the first story, which gives the anthology its title. It doesn't draw from the front page, but from familiarity closer home: a woman, educated, earning, competent, married to a man who, somehow, thinks she is his verbal punching bag. Bring on the cruel humour, the sarcastic digs, the open disregard and contempt – the sum and substance of too many women's lives – until, one day, Anjali reaches a breaking point.

The best part of the story for me was the quiet exuberance with which she accepts the fallout of her actions. There's no guilt, no breast-beating, none of the conventional comeuppance that seem to be the lot of most woman protagonists when they step outside the box.

By the end of the story, though, it's easy to see which way Nair is going with the collection, and the second title, 'Quota Girls', ends up being super-predictable. That is always the danger with fiction that bases itself on the 'state of the nation' and it applies, unfortunately, to the majority of this anthology.

'Field of Flowers', set in the badlands of northern India, will immediately recall multiple tragedies, including the infamous Hathras case, and succumbs to the same pitfalls as 'Quota Girls', despite Nair's brave attempt to elevate the narration with mythological parallels.

'The Land of Lost Content' moves away from the wider Indian landscape into a gated community and the life of a social media influencer. But here too, the storyline is so predictable as to be boring (unless you've been living under a rock), further let down by the two-second turnaround.

The exceptions

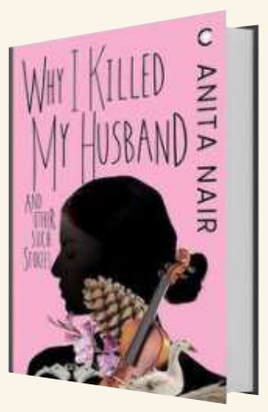
The two stories that manage to beat the formula are, naturally, the ones that stand out. 'The Little Duck Girl' – Nair's first "pastoral tale that turned pastoral-political" – looks to get under the skin of a middle-aged man in remote Kerala, who wonders why the citizenship protests in northern India should bother him at all.

A little more sharpness, a little more nuance and delicacy, and it could have been an excellent study of the self-involved personhood that allows wrong to be perpetuated.

No such complaints about 'Twin Beds', a surprising, open-ended story of two people stuck in a marital rut, who discover new possibilities in role-playing.

Like most anthologies, *Why I Killed My Husband* is a mixed bag. Takeaways will vary, but if one is really interested in figuring out why India works the way it does, better answers might be available in the brilliant reportage-based non-fiction titles that are still hitting bookstores with some regularity and address a few of Nair's own concerns.

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based writer and editor.



Why I Killed My Husband
Anita Nair
Context
₹599

Iran's turmoil, longlisted

War sagas and a banned 1980s novella are among the 13 books in the International Booker spotlight

Team Magazine

The Islamic Republic of Iran "is dead morally, economically, and socially", wrote author Shahrnush Parsipur in a recent article in *Time* magazine.

Describing her country of birth as "a half-lifeless body collapsed on the ground, yet still possessing powerful arms", the revolutionary Iranian writer rued the unrest and violent military crackdown that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians in the West Asian country.

Last week, 80-year-old Parsipur, who now lives in Amsterdam, found herself on the International Booker Prize 2026 longlist with her banned (in Iran) 1989 novella *Women without Men*, recently translated from the original Persian into English by Faridoun Farrokh. An evocative mystical tale about the interwoven destinies of five women, the book posits a future without men.

The writing on the war

Iran also features in 38-year-old Shida Bazyar's debut novel *The Nights Are Quiet in Tehran*, translated from German by Ruth Martin, which takes readers through 40 years of a family's life amid the ravages of war.

The other war titles on this year's longlist for the £50,000 prize, divided equally between the author and translator, include Dutch writer Anjet Daanje's World War I love story *The Remembered Soldier*, translated by David McKay, and award-winning French writer Mathias Énard's historical fiction, *The Deserters*, translated by Charlotte Mandell.

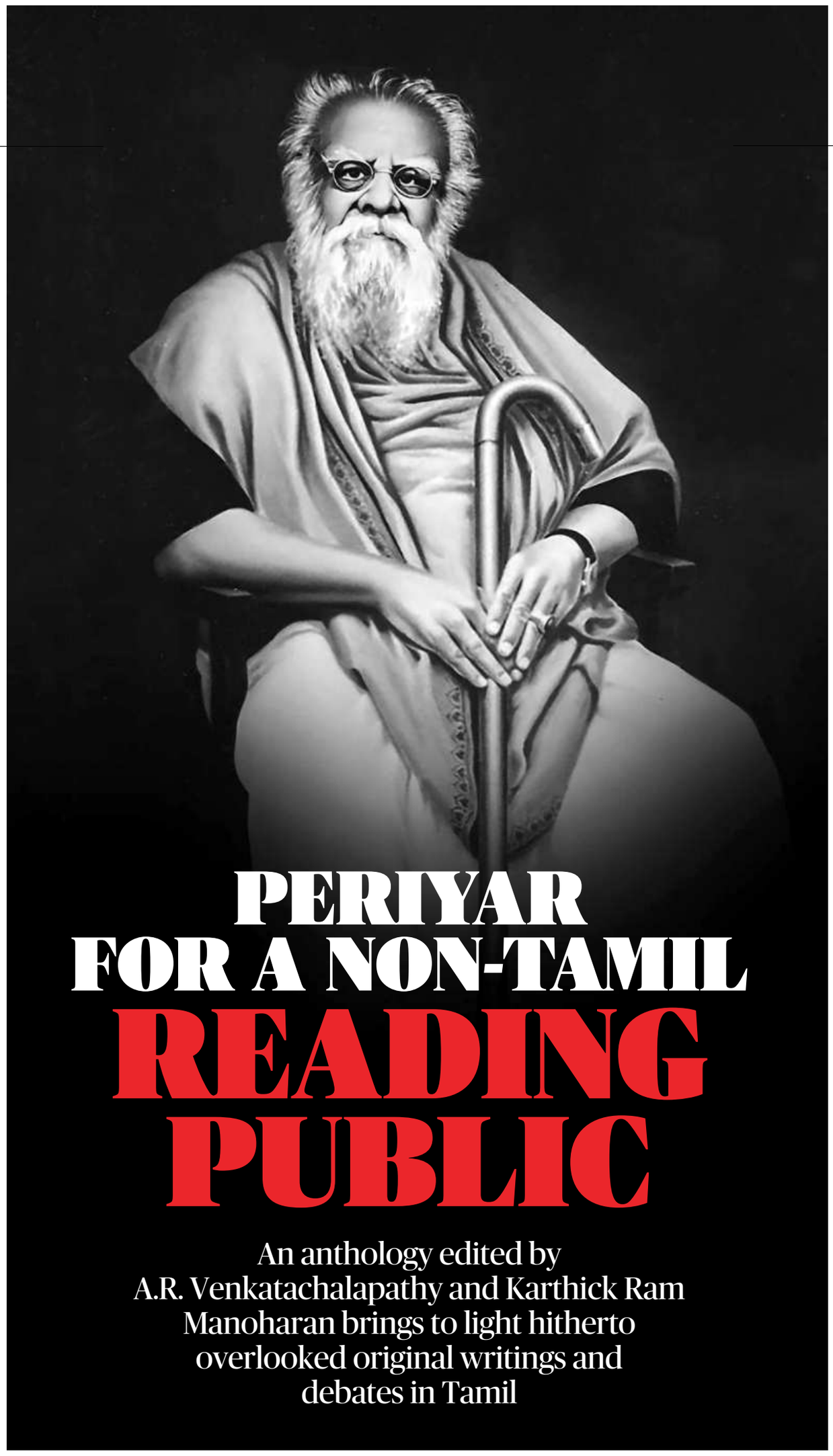
Iranian author Shahrnush Parsipur; and (far left) the 13 books in this year's longlist. (THEBOOKERPRIZES.COM & MANDANA)

Chair of judges Natasha Brown, whose satirical novel *Universality* was longlisted for last year's Booker Prize, says, "Many of the submitted books examined the devastating consequences of war... The list also features petty squabbles between neighbours, mysterious mountain villages, Big Pharma conspiracies, witchy women, ill-fated lovers, a haunted prison, and obscure film references... "

The longlist of 13 books includes several authors and translators who have been previously nominated for the International Booker, such as Argentinian environmental activist Gabriela Cabezón Cámara (*We Are Green and Trembling*, translated by Robin Myers), Bulgarian poet and actor Rene Karabash (*She Who Remains*, translated by Izidora Angel) and Kira Josefsson, who has translated Swedish author Ia Genberg's short story collection, *Small Comfort*.

Indian-origin Canadian translator Padma Viswanathan is also on the longlist with Portuguese author Ana Paula Maia for their prison novella *On Earth As It Is Beneath*.

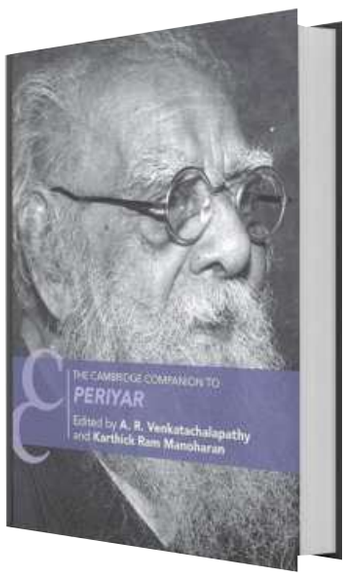
The shortlist of six books will be announced on March 31, followed by the winner on May 19. Last year, the Prize went to Kannada writer Banu Mushtaq and translator Deepa Bhasthi for their short story collection *Heart Lamp*, about the everyday lives of ordinary Muslim women.



PERIYAR FOR A NON-TAMIL READING PUBLIC

An anthology edited by A.R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan brings to light hitherto overlooked original writings and debates in Tamil

The Cambridge Companion to Periyar
Edited by A.R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan
Cambridge University Press
₹950



A.S. Panneerselvan

The Cambridge Companion to Periyar, edited by A.R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan, is a significant addition for a non-Tamil reading public seeking to understand 20th century Tamil Nadu and its distinct political trajectory, with social justice as its operational fulcrum.

Most Anglo-American scholarship on the subject relied on anti-colonial narratives produced by nationalists. Both bodies of writing were conspicuously silent on larger questions, such as self-respect and the quest for dignity, and validated the entrenched, vertical social hierarchy that refused to imagine a horizontal social compact.

The then-dominant Cambridge School, led by David Washbrook and Christopher Baker, characterised the Dravidian movement not as a genuine ideological or social revolution, but as a product of elite competition for colonial resources. This reading was endorsed by nationalists both from the Congress and the Indian Left. The limitation of this view was first academically challenged by M.S.S. Pandian in his pioneering essay, 'Beyond colonial crumbs: Cambridge school, identity politics and Dravidian movement(s)' in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1995.

The last 30 years mark a significant shift in the writing of the history of Tamil Nadu. Rhetoric has taken a back seat, and evidence has become the building block of this new way of understanding Tamil Nadu from the late 19th century to the present. *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar*, in a sense, is part of this larger course-correction by academia. The editors should be commended for presenting a wide repository of the contemporary history of Tamil Nadu and succinctly summarising that knowledge for the non-Tamil universe.

The opening essay, written by the editors, titled 'Introducing an iconoclast', is not just a biographical summary of Periyar, but traces his political and social journey across its multiple strands, highlighting both areas of convergence with other political thoughts, and divergence. The brevity with which they have captured the full import of two defining words: *suiyamariadhai* (Self Respect) and *samadharmam* (equality principle) in the sub-section, 'E.V. Ramasamy, before he became 'Periyar'', is an early indication that the Companion is intended to be a reader and not an encyclopaedia. Tamil readers are familiar with writer and independent researcher Pazha. Athiyaman's book on Periyar and the Vaikom Satyagraha. This rather exhaustive book has been compressed into a long essay and translated by Venkatachalapathy. This essay should be read with Sundar Kaali's essay, 'The rationale for reason: Periyar on religion', to get an insight into the profound difference between faith and bigotry in Periyar's political and social praxis.

While every essay deserves mention and evaluation, the essay, 'The social subsumes the economic: Periyar's reading of economic power in caste society', by M. Vijayabaskar, provides a glimpse into the breadth and depth of this anthology. Vijayabaskar explains how Periyar's reading of social injustice was "rooted in a set of conceptual insights on how power shapes economic relations in caste society." Vijayabaskar contends that in Periyar's political imaginary, the 'economic' was a sub-set of the 'social'. He explains how Periyar was able to see the limitation in redistribution of economic power and how "it could not be sustained without addressing the social institutions that help reproduce economic hierarchies and concentrate economic power."

With many positing the 'Dravidian Model' or the 'Tamil Nadu Model' as an alternative to the Gujarat Model, this Companion provides answers from the wellspring of the Dravidian movement, drawing on hitherto overlooked original writings and debates in Tamil.

The writer is director-general of Chennai Institute of Journalism.

Nobody above and nobody below

A compilation and translation of Periyar's speeches and editorials on the question of caste

A.S. Panneerselvan

The book, *Caste and the Crisis of Dignity: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Speaks At Caste Association Meetings and Caste Abolition Conferences*, is a vital compilation and translation of Periyar's speeches and editorials on the crucial caste question and the attendant crisis of dignity in our society.

While B.R. Ambedkar's idea of graded inequality has reached a larger public, the sharp observations of Periyar about the means to annihilate caste stayed within the region largely because they were in Tamil.

'Dynamic transformation'

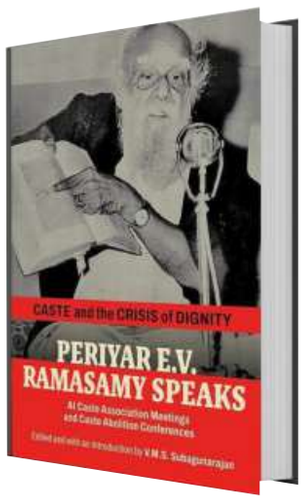
Periyar's views paved the way for the dynamic transformation of Tamil Nadu starting from securing women's voting rights to fair representation in both education and employment. The significant aspect of this anthology is V.M.S. Subagunarajan's long introduction (about 68 pages), which annotates and contextualises the texts, giving us an idea of how dynamically Periyar shifted gears after every low-intensity victory to keep the focus on an egalitarian society. He was aware of the Indian social reality that for every seemingly step forward, there would be a couple of steps back. His acute understanding – that entrenched interest groups will devise and design structures in such way that vertical hierarchy always prevails over the most legitimate idea of a horizontal power structure – convinced him that this intransigence needed creative interventions.

Annihilation of caste

One of the questions hurled at Periyar and the social historians of Tamil Nadu is: if Periyar wanted annihilation of caste, why did he attend caste conferences and address them? The answer lies in the first three chapters of this book: (I) Caste conferences; (II) What is a caste party? (III) Annihilating caste in caste associations. A powerful technique adopted by Periyar in addressing the vexatious question of caste hierarchies at caste conferences was his statement, 'nobody above and nobody below'. Every caste organisation loved his pronouncement when he said that there is 'none above you'. But the moment Periyar started talking about 'nobody below', there were murmurs, dissatisfaction, and even resentment. Periyar used this deep-seated and embedded streak in castes across the entire spectrum to open up space for dialogue and to, a large extent, bring in the ideas of social justice and equality as an everyday talking point.

The fact that there is an entire oeuvre of writings by Periyar on caste organisations gives us an idea of his approach to caste. This book documents Periyar's speeches at more than 30 caste organisation conferences. It also records a similar number of his speeches at caste abolition conferences. Periyar did not take an ostrich-like position on caste issues. He did not, for a moment, feel that not refusing to acknowledge caste will make it go away, or that the humiliation it heaps on people will somehow magically vanish. He firmly believed that if caste has to be abolished, one has to take the battle to its den, the caste organisations, for a head-on confrontation.

Subagunarajan's assertion that Periyar was not interested in being remembered but in being understood is validated by this book. It documents some of Periyar's tricky, often contested, and even contradictory positions. The meticulousness of this book provides the context to understand Periyar more fully.



Caste and the Crisis of Dignity: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Speaks At Caste Association Meetings and Caste Abolition Conferences
Edited by V.M.S. Subagunarajan
Speaking Tiger Books
₹599

Might at the margins

The eastern Himalayan's life is lived in the interstices between great power rivalries, rues Akhilesh Upadhyay

Abdus Salam
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The 'Chicken's Neck', in non-avian parlance, is a 60-km-long strip of land that keeps India's territorial contiguity with its eight north-eastern States. About 22km wide at its narrowest, it is cheek by jowl with four international borders – the Tibetan Administrative Region's Chumbi Valley and Bhutan to the north, Nepal to its west, and Bangladesh to the south and east. A geographical oddity that traces its genesis to the Partition, the strategic corridor's significance – and vulnerability – is apparent even to the naked eye, let alone the nation-states encircling it. It hit home with the 2017 China-India stand-off over the construction of a road by the People's Liberation Army in Doklam, a tri-junction under 100 km from the strip.

As one superpower hunkers down from the vantage point of the Chumbi Valley and an emerging one fast-tracks fortifications to keep it at bay, little lives are subordinated to big states, finds journalist-turned-policy analyst Akhilesh Upadhyay. Fluid borders turn hard,

GETTY IMAGES

comings and goings grind to a halt, and kindred ties fray as borderlands splinter along border lines. "Decisions from faraway capitals often harm the local residents who have little connection to the distant state," he writes. To illustrate the point, *In the Margins of Empires – A History of the Chicken's Neck* casts a wider gaze. The author treks up the eastern Himalaya in Nepal, drives through Siliguri, Kalimpong and Gangtok in India, and touches down at Lhasa in search of a lost interconnectedness.

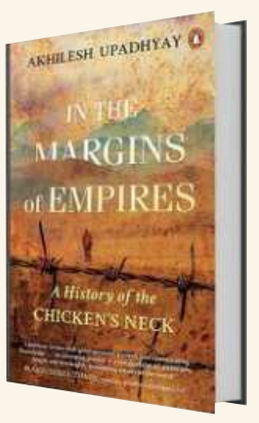
Closing of borders

Upadhyay traces much of the trans-Himalayan rupture to the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s, which put not only New Delhi on guard but also forced King Mahendra of Nepal to consolidate frontier regions that had a skeletal state presence up until then. The cross-border trade in Olangchung Gola, on the upper reaches of eastern Nepal, ceased after the Tibet takeover led to the closing of what had been an open border.

Similarly, the closing of the Tibet-Bhutan border in 1960 shut down the centuries-old trade route through Chumbi Valley; Kalimpong, midway between Siliguri and Gangtok, which flourished as a Calcutta-Lhasa connector bypassing Nepal, was another immediate casualty.

The post-annexation geopolitics brought other global powers into the mix. The author, at the risk of repetition, describes at great length the Eisenhower-era 'Mission ST CIRCUS' plan where the CIA trained Khampa fighters in high-altitude Colorado to build the resistance movement in Tibet, with Mustang in Nepal becoming the de facto base camp for guerrilla operations. With the U.S. cooling off on Communism after its 'ping-pong' success, the need to keep Beijing in good humour finally forced Kathmandu to clamp down on the insurgents in 1974; parallels can be found in the flushing out of ULFA secessionists from Bhutan and Bangladesh decades later amid a reset in ties.

As Nepal and Bangladesh undergo intense political churn while India and China are on the cusp of a 'Hindi-Chini *bhai-bhai*' redux, Upadhyay's lament is that the fortunes of the highlanders and the Terai people hinge on the waxing and waning of diplomatic relations. When not blockaded by New Delhi, the Nepali will still take an autorickshaw to Siliguri for her shopping run. And the Bangladeshi will complain ad nauseam about layering up but make it to Nathula and Darjeeling – until hawkish comments emanating from political quarters about choking the Chicken's Neck stops him in his tracks.



In the Margins of Empires — A History of the Chicken's Neck
Akhilesh Upadhyay
Vintage
₹499

INDIA'S AI RECKONING

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

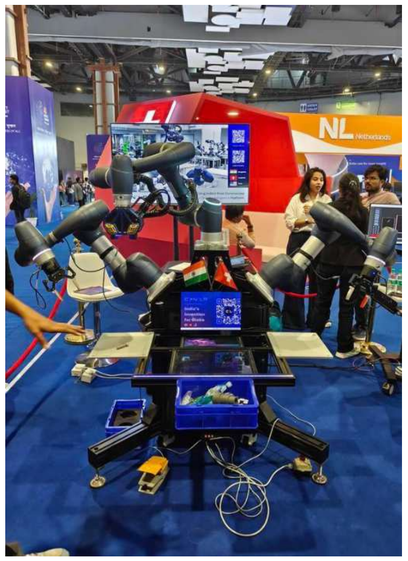
She said on stage that companion chatbots need more awareness among parents, and expressed relief at Character AI's decision to ban minors from its platform.

'Capability overhang'

In India, the government has been able to get citizens to adopt, at scale, technology initiatives such as Aadhaar, which civil society groups see as an invasive identity system that can be used for surveillance. In the U.S. and Europe, the idea of a national ID card has nearly always faced insurmountable pushback. Does India's relative techno-optimism leave it more vulnerable to disruption?

"Techno-optimism often comes from not having experienced the potential downsides," Russell argues. "Once you have this digital identity system, and everyone's life is, in principle, detectable by centralised government systems, what if some future government is more autocratic, authoritarian? You're setting up a system that basically makes that authoritarian state permanent."

Techno-optimism isn't nearly as widespread in some countries owing to the generational vigilance against its fallout. Not so in India, where leapfrogging into the digital age has overtaken (and outspent) any civil society voices that seek to restrain it. In her 2020 book *Brand New Nation*, academic Ravinder Kaur lays out how technological innovations have fit in with Indian societies, and describes a "technofriendly language well understood by a younger generation enchanted with software utopias".



Robots on display at the India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi. (GETTY IMAGES)

During the dot-com boom and the IT industry's early years, a large number of Indians eagerly learnt the ropes and became the foundation of an entire industry flourishing in cities like Bengaluru, which remains a tech hub to this day. "The global elite are invited to explore the nation-as-commodity – Brand India – dressed up seductively as an abundant and yet untapped container of vast natural resources, a techno-friendly labour force, middle-class consumption, and scientific innovation," Kaur writes critically.

OpenAI and Google have showered on crores of Indians free access to some of their more advanced models. For those still on the unconnected side of the digital divide, it is unclear if the walls have become higher, or if AI will help to bridge the divide. But if there is one demographic certainty, it is that the youth will play a fundamental role in the diffusion of AI.

"India's large and youthful population means young people will disproportionately shape how AI is adopted and used there," OpenAI said in its Signals report, which it periodically publishes to show policymakers how people are actually using LLMs. "ChatGPT usage in India is noticeably younger than the global average – users with declared ages 18-24 now send the largest share of messages."

OpenAI's Chatterji says that Indian users are already leveraging ChatGPT and coding tool Codex's most advanced capabilities. He points to a metric called 'capability overhang', which is the gap between what an AI model can do, and what it is actually used for. "India's a little further ahead than most countries on this. You guys have a higher percentage of people doing coding and data analysis than the average," Chatterji says, expressing hope that the economics of AI, and its ubiquity, will lead to more value across the board.

"Of course, people are thinking about AI and its potential disruptive effects in different industries and jobs," he concedes. "This is natural. But we don't often think enough about the person who didn't have access [to this technology] to begin with. That's the most exciting thing."

At the Delhi AI summit, during the daily press briefing, I asked IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw if the Indian government believes AGI is coming in the next two years? And if so, are we prepared?

After quickly running through answers for other questions, Vaishnaw skipped over whether the government believed AGI was coming. But, he insisted, India was ready. "Yes, we have a comprehensive plan," he said, "as we have maintained right from day one. Every sector will benefit from this."

We're not seeing a huge impact, let's say, on unemployment rates around the world because of AI yet. Part of that is because, I think, people are still learning how to use it. They're using it for a lot of positive value

RONNIE CHATTERJI
OpenAI's chief economist

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

ALL SET FOR YOUR CHEMISTRY CLASS TEST, SWEETY?
YES, MUM!
SHALL WE RUN THROUGH THE PERIODIC TABLE QUICKLY?
SURE!
Hg? MERCURY.
As? ARSENIC.
Cd? CADMIUM.
Pb? LEAD.
Cr? CHROMIUM.
Du? UMM...
DU?
DUGONGS, AFTER INGESTING ALL THESE HEAVY METALS FROM CONTAMINATED SEAGRASS.
STUDIES SHOW HEAVY METAL BIOACCUMULATION IN DUGONGS FROM MARINE POLLUTION.

IN CONVERSATION

PUNJAB AND ALL THINGS RED-HOT

Sarmad Khoosat on his dark comedy *Lali*, the first all-Pakistani production at Berlinale — and the most talked about South Asian film at the festival

Tanushree Ghosh
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Pakistani filmmaker Sarmad Sultan Khoosat knows a thing or two about courting controversies. His directorial *Zindagi Tamasha* (*Circus of Life*, 2020, which won Busan film festival's Kim Jiseok Award) and co-production *Joyland* (2022, Cannes Un Certain Regard Jury winner) were banned at home for choosing topics deemed "controversial" by religious conservatives and political parties.

The former explored a scandal in the life of a devout man, and the latter a love story of a transwoman and cis-het man. The din at home forced them to drop out of the Oscars after being named Pakistan's official entries.

Khoosat's latest film, *Lali*, is a deliciously dark comic tale about marriage – with a feminist twist. Its unconventional storytelling and genre leap made it one of the most-talked about among the South Asian films at Berlinale this year.

Perhaps, it was predestined that the year the first all-Pakistani film came to Berlinale, the most political of A-lister global film festivals, the festival itself would be gripped by the storms of a politicised controversy, which stemmed from jury president Wim Wenders' "cinema as a counterweight to politics" comment when asked about the Gaza conflict. And so, Khoosat, like many others, took a stand.

At *Lali*'s world premiere, he said: "This moment carries gratitude and responsibility. *Lali* means red. Red is the colour of celebration in our part of the world – bridal clothes, music, of love and longing – but red is also the colour of warning, anger, of blood. It is a colour that refuses to be ignored. Cinema does not exist outside the world; it absorbs its beauty and its brutality. It carries joy and it carries loss. With my film, I carry my conscience with me, to those suffering back home, around the world and especially Gaza... Art and humanity are inseparable. To stand for one is to stand for the other. And in these times of unprecedented crimes against humanity, we must stand on the right side of history."

Lali opens with the wedding of the scar-faced introvert Sajawal (Channan Hanif) and Zeba (Mamya Shajaffar) in a small town in Punjab, Pakistan. As celebrations begin with pistols shot in the air, a bullet accidentally hits Sajawal's mother Sohni Ammi (Farazeh Syed), but she survives. The 'cursed' bride's previous three suitors died before the wedding, and Sajawal asserts he'll survive her curse. When I mention how the film shows an intriguing link between grief and sex, Shajaffar says, "Do you know there's a study that says, people are most likely to consummate when they're the saddest?"

This cocktail of dread and desire, co-written with his former assistant director Sundus Hashmi, features escalating insecurities, a decaying house wrapped in a shroud of eeriness, secrets hiding in closets, violence suspended in thick air, and, perhaps, a *djinn*. This thematic *djinn* linked the two Pakistani films at Berlinale, *Lali* (Panorama segment) and British-Pakistani filmmaker Seemab Gul's *Ghost School* (Generation KPlus). Edited excerpts from an interview with Khoosat:

Question: *Was the title supposed to be 'Shikra', inspired from Indian Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi's eponymous poem.*

Answer: Who told you? [Laughs.] Films are strange creatures, they keep growing, breathing on their own. For a long time, on paper, it was Shiv Kumar Batalvi's poem 'Shikra': *Maye ni maye, main ik shikra yaar banaya [O my mother, I made a hawk my beloved]*. But then it started feeling like it's a bit on the nose because the bird is in the film. Then *Lali* started speaking to me more. For practical purposes, too, it wouldn't need a translated English title. And storytelling-wise, *Lali* works like an Easter egg – as a rosebud.

Q: *It is also inspired from a short story 'Kaala Kambal' (black blanket).*

A: In contemporary Urdu literature, there are few short story writers. It was a favourite genre with pre-Partition writers like Ismat Chughtai, [Sadat Hasan] Manto and [Rajinder Singh] Bedi. *Kaala Kambal* is a semi-published collection of short stories by an actor-aunt of mine that I first read in my 20s. Bizarre and abstract, they read like delicious, sensory, real stuff with a close, empathetic eye on the nuance of the Punjabi setting. Of course, we've extrapolated a lot, with newer and different characters, but the core is borrowed from it. The heart of the film comes from literature, which is always a great resource, it makes things easier to navigate.

(Clockwise from below) Pakistani filmmaker Sarmad Khoosat; and stills from his movie *Lali*, which premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival last month. (SHOAIKH-USMAN JAMSHED/KHOOSAT FILMS/BERLINALE)

Films in Pakistan come with not just the challenge of making them, but also releasing them. In releasing most of my films, the stories around them became bigger — from controversies to real threats.

Q: *You've been inspired by Rabindranath Tagore. What do you make of India and Pakistan's connected artistic roots?*

A: I'd say the subcontinent, between Bengal and Punjab [two regions most affected by Partition], and then from the north to the south... has so much to offer. Up until Partition, it was all common ground in terms of the languages, stories, seasons, and festivities. But for me, somehow, it's more Punjab and Bengal, when it comes to art and all things lovely: music, colour, *sari*, *dhoti* and food.

Q: *Your films are imbued with symbolism. Lali is theatrical too. The overpowering colour red and the Shakespearean chorus-like singing by the four men.*

A: I've always been scared to use red on screen. It's a tricky colour. It bleeds too quickly. Symbols, colours, elements come to me in disjointed fragments, and they come with the fear of overpowering everything with meaning. The idea of the four men standing – yes, somewhere it is very Shakespearean. But did I think about it consciously? No. I wanted live singing in the film, not pre-recorded or playback music, and as much original compositions [as possible]. Their casting was the toughest because we needed actors who could sing, or singers who could act, beginning with Sohni Ammi, the four boys, Mamya and Rasti [Farooq]. It was a long process of finding those pieces of poetry.

Q: *What commentary on masculinity, patriarchy and marriage were you trying to make through Lali?*

A: A lot of lived experience has gone into it, not just my own marriage. Everybody has a lot to say about marriage, from over-glamourised, airbrushed, Yash Chopra-like ideas and all things red, flowers, festivities and *suhaag raat*, to dreary, dark, everyday events and incidents that you see around the union of two people. To oversimplify it, I'd say I've seen so many bad marriages around me. I'm not taking away from the idea that we're social animals, and this institution has existed for centuries, but in our culture, I think there's so much insistence on the need for it to be a big marker in your life. I've seen very few people who are prepared for that kind of big, life-changing twist. [Through my characters] I wish for an alter ego or altered version of life for many women around me. I also wish there was another version of the idea of marriage, where it was not so messy. Marriage, festivity, grief and violence seem to co-exist.

Scan the QR code to watch the full interview on **magazine.thehindu.com**

INTERVIEW

'HERITAGE IS WORTH INVESTING IN'

When conservation moves beyond nostalgia to make economic sense, with public-private partnerships like 'Adopt a Monument'

Investing in the past (Clockwise from below) The restored Rajon-ki-Baoli in Delhi; designer Tarun Tahiliani's 30-year anniversary gala at British Residency in Hyderabad; the painstakingly restored compressed paper ceiling at Residency; and WMF's Bénédicte de Montlaur. (COURTESY WMF, TARUN TAHILIANI AND SERISH NANISETTI)

Serish Nanisetti
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Heritage conservation + tourism = more jobs. This was the formula spelt out by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during the Union Budget presentation on February 1.

Weeks earlier, the New York-based World Monuments Fund (WMF) had shared the same recipe of private-public partnership that it used to restore Hyderabad's historic British Residency building in 2023. WMF, which has been involved with the Residency project for over two decades, is now working to restore the gardens in the complex, and the Musi riverfront in Hyderabad along which it stands.

It has collaborated with the Telangana government to restore 25 heritage structures across the State. WMF is also at work to conserve community stepwells scattered across India.

Recently, WMF's Chief Executive Officer Bénédicte de Montlaur was at the British Residency to mark 60 years of the non-profit's inception, its 10th anniversary in India, and 30 years of couturier Tarun Tahiliani's fashion label. Sharing her thoughts on adaptive reuse and community involvement, de Montlaur elaborates on why heritage conservation is central to India's future as an economic driver. Edited excerpts:

Question: *WMF had a long association with the British Residency project. Why was it significant?*

Answer: It's a perfect example of what we try to do. The Residency is an extraordinary heritage site with a grand history of being a British outpost in Hyderabad, but today, it has found new life as the centre of a women's university. That's what we call adaptive reuse: giving historic buildings a meaningful contemporary role instead of letting them decay or become museums with no real social role.

What excites us is that this project has gone beyond just restoring one monument. We completed the main building in 2023, but now we're working on the entire complex that includes the old physics and chemistry blocks, the gardens, and access to the Musi riverfront.

Q: *How did this project begin?*

A: It started with interest from our international members who saw the poor condition of the building [just after the publication of William Dalrymple's book *White Mughals*]. An American member and later a British supporter partnered with Indian conservation architects to nominate it to our 'World Monuments Watch' programme, which highlights monuments at risk.

Initially, most of the funding came from international donors. But today, something more important is happening. Strong local involvement. Hyderabad now has a real constituency for heritage. Business leaders, professionals and institutions are contributing, and the university itself is a key partner. That's the future of conservation, where global expertise meets local ownership and pride.

Q: *The Musi Riverfront is a part of WMF's Watch. Why?*

A: Because heritage does not exist in isolation. The Residency stands on the Musi, and from this project emerged a larger idea of restoring an entire heritage corridor along the river. This includes old bridges, the Osmania General Hospital, Government City College, the State Central Library, and several other historic buildings.

The Telangana government has taken this forward through a public-private partnership model called 'Adopt a Monument'. It invites corporations and citizens to support conservation. We see this as a natural extension of what began with individual monuments.

Q: *Why the focus on stepwells now?*

A: Because they are both historical and urgently relevant today. Stepwells were brilliant water-harvesting systems and social spaces. With India facing water stress, restoring them is not nostalgia, it is practical infrastructure.

We are working with the Tata Trusts to restore stepwells across the country. One example is Rajon-ki-Baoli in Delhi, which was completely dry and neglected. Today, it has water again, it has fish, and it is being used by the local community. These structures recharge groundwater, improve microclimates, and bring back public spaces into neighbourhoods.

Q: *How do you work with local communities, especially where there is resistance?*

A: There is no alternative to community involvement. People must see direct benefits such as water access, tourism, social spaces and employment.

In many cities, stepwells were covered or forgotten because land became more valuable than heritage. We try to reverse that mindset by showing that conservation actually creates economic activity. Last year alone, our projects in India generated over 140 local jobs, involved nearly 60 conservation experts and trained around 280 students as guides.

Q: *How do you see the growing role of private companies in heritage?*

A: It has to be a partnership. Governments often lack expertise or capacity, while private players bring money and management skills. But conservation professionals must always be involved. Across the world, including in Rajasthan in India, many historic buildings have been converted into hotels or cultural spaces and are better preserved because they generate revenue.

Q: *What is holding back heritage conservation in India?*

A: It's not just money. It's the mindset. People must believe heritage is worth investing in. Look at cities like Paris. The conservation brings tourism, jobs, better quality of life, and a stronger sense of identity. It's not about the past; it's about the future. India's heritage is incredibly rich. If conserved wisely, it can be one of the country's greatest social and economic assets.

BINGE WATCH

Damage control at the Oscars?

No major surprises, fewer songs, no censorship fears, safety-technical awards, and a Trump showdown are on the cards at the 2026 Academy Awards

In January, the producers of the forthcoming Oscars award ceremony (on March 15) dropped a bombshell. They announced that this year, only two of the nominated songs in the Best Original Song category will be performed live – the global hit 'Golden' from *KPop Demon Hunters* and 'I Lied to You' from that incredible interval-block scene in *Sinners*.

The logic given was that of all the nominated songs, these two played the most significant roles in their respective films. The producers needed to save time too, "to create a fast-paced, entertaining and cohesive show."

Soon, these conversations about time-saving will be rendered moot because starting 2029, the Oscars ceremony will no longer be televised, but live-streamed on YouTube.

Reputation on the line

Hollywood has suffered a lot of bad PR in the 2020s, and on several disparate fronts, too. The nosediving quality of the average big-budget release, the reputational hit due to the 2023 writer's strike, the shocking 2021 death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins after being shot with an on-set gun by actor-producer Alec Baldwin.

On the awards front, too, things didn't look too good, what with the Oscars giving Best Picture to an outmoded, tone-deaf, visibly terrible film like *The Green Book* in 2019, and the Golden Globes getting embroiled in two separate racism scandals (discrimination against Asian-Americans and African-Americans).

The Golden Globes went on hiatus in 2022 and returned with an all-new voting body, with diversity requirements built in. The Oscars had already stipulated, back in 2024, that every eligible film in each category must meet the Academy's "representation and inclusion standards". Basically, the film must meet two of four stated standards pertaining to representation, creative leadership, industry access, and audience development.

Most of the changes in the awards ceremonies for the Oscars and the Golden Globes, therefore, can be read in this light, i.e. damage control. But one could argue that the Oscars were invented for damage control – back in the 1920s, it was MGM founder Louis B. Mayer who formed the Academy to retain big-studio control over Hollywood talent. It was always intended to be a kind of "controlled union" that thwarts actual unionisation efforts.

Sinners, Timothee Chalamet (*Marty Supreme*), and Jessie Buckley (*Hamnet*) will likely win.

What's in store

First, expect no major surprises when it comes to the major awards categories this season. The Oscars (like the Golden Globes) are trying to rehabilitate their image and be seen as a reliable marker of quality again. Hot favourite and universally acclaimed *Sinners* has been nominated for 16 awards and is likely to scoop up Best Film, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. Timothee Chalamet is likely to win Best Actor for his performance in *Marty Supreme*, while Jessie Buckley is a lock for Best Actress for *Hamnet*.

Second, the Academy has stipulated that in order to vote in a category, members have to prove that they watched every film in that category on the Academy's viewing portal. In some quarters this has been dubbed the "Brutalist Rule" after *The New York Times* reported last year that several Academy voters had not seen *The Brutalist* before voting on it, citing its 215-minute runtime.

Now, far be it from me to criticise an organisation explicitly invented to union-bust, but shouldn't this have been a requirement much, much earlier? Why did it take a bunch of newspaper Op-Eds to ensure that the Academy's sage voters actually watched the films they were supposed to assess?

According to last year's *Forbes* article, Oscars viewership figures have been steadily declining in the 21st century. In the early 2000s, the total viewership "hovered in the 40 million viewer range" with the 1998 peak viewership being 57.5 million (this was the *Titanic* year). In 2020, however, this number was a mere 23.6 million and 19.69 million in 2025. So, the Academy can put their best foot forward, to ensure all the popular, crowd-pleasing nominees win, and it *still* may not affect the bottom line much.

Robert Aramayo's recent BAFTA win over the likes of Timothee Chalamet and Leonardo DiCaprio will certainly affect the Oscars prediction market. It remains to be seen whether the Academy follows suit and throws us a curve ball or two, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Aditya Mani Jha *is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.*

PERSON OF INTEREST

NANDINI BHOWMIK: BRIDGING THE GAP

The Sanskrit scholar, Indologist and priest is using Vedic mantras to write a new script and call out patriarchy

Nandini Bhowmik, 66, has been doing her bit to shake up Hindu society since 2009. Her daughter's wedding was the first one she officiated as a priest. "Both families agreed, though nobody had heard of such a thing," she says. "Not all the guests were satisfied."

The Sanskrit scholar-professor, Indologist and priest says she "spreads human values through religion". In a country where identity is employed every day to divide people, Bhowmik uses her teachings to unite the younger generation and, through them, their families.

"Actually all religions speak of the same thing, the path is different but everyone speaks of human welfare," she says. "My deliberations and explanations also point that way." The 2020 Bengali film *Brahma Janen Gopon Kommoti*, about a woman priest who smashes patriarchal prejudices, was inspired by her.

Shubhamastu, the name of the charitable trust she co-founded in Kolkata all those years ago with her college friend Ruma Roy, could easily be seen as their gift to couples who want to marry irrespective of caste, religion, or nationality. Its tagline is, appropriately, 'Priests for humanity, priests for a better society'. Now they are a team of 19 priests and devotional singers, all women, who officiate some 170 weddings every year, in addition to other ceremonies. "Young people contact me on their own," says Bhowmik. I can see why they are drawn to her. What's more comforting than an erudite grandmother with progressive values?

Honouring all religions

Bhowmik's own grandmother was an early mentor. "She was an enlightened woman. She always taught me to keep my head high, that women should have honour, and whatever you do, you do with dignity and based on sound education," she says. "I try to follow her wisdom every day." Progressive teachers and a father who became a *sanyasi* were her other inspirations.

Bhowmik does her bit to spread light among young couples. "The world is full of negativity," she says.

Her daughter's wedding was the first one Nandini Bhowmik officiated as a priest.

"In many instances, the children want us to talk to their parents and convince them, so I do that," she says. "And most times I succeed, but in a few I don't and the wedding gets cancelled."

Interfaith couples often contact her for the Hindu ceremony. "They give honour to both religions and thanks to them, the older generation learns to think with an open mind," says Bhowmik who has travelled across India and the world to conduct these rituals.

Using Vedic mantras to write a new script, Bhowmik transforms the wedding arena into a space that gives women a more equal start in the marital journey. She doesn't believe in any auspicious time or date (every day is equally auspicious) or that a woman's menstrual cycle makes her impure. Ceremonies are stripped of sexism and don't include rituals such as the *kanyadaan*, where parents hand their daughters over to their future husbands as if they are property. Phrases such as 'I will provide' become 'we will provide for each other'. Here, grooms don't ask brides to take charge of the family and children. Instead, they wish each other good luck and pledge joint responsibility for household chores.

One with the scriptures

"I have ensured that the bride can get married with equal dignity and honour," says Bhowmik. In her ceremonies, a woman doesn't lurk behind a man, only following as he leads. The couple participate equally in every ritual. "They walk side-by-side around the ritual fire too," she adds.

India has thousands of women priests and even state-managed temples and local festival organisers now invite them to lead. In 2021, Bhowmik, Roy and the other two members of their core team, Seymanti Banerjee and Paulomi Chakraborty, became the first women to conduct the ritual Durga Puja prayers at 66 Pally, a prominent Kolkata *pandal*, which had a Theyyam-themed idol last year. Bhowmik's work has had a ripple effect in her neighbourhood. "In Kolkata and its outskirts, there are many women priests," she says. "I know three-four groups personally." Her main advice to them is to keep studying the scriptures, as she does daily.

At Shubhamastu, the priests, all of them Sanskrit scholars, conduct ceremonies in groups of three or four, incorporating Rabindra Sangeet in all the celebrations. "Music has a language of its own," says Bhowmik, who translates all the chants so everyone can understand and appreciate the words. A wedding ceremony typically lasts one hour, against the 2 to 3-hour ceremonies conducted by many male priests. "I don't think they even know the meaning of some of the mantras they have learnt by heart," she says of some male priests.

Of course, she faced her share of opposition from this group in the early days, when they told people that what she was doing was sinful and would definitely have consequences. Seventeen years after she began her journey down this spiritual path, the consequences are visible for all to see and appreciate.

***Priya Ramani** is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.*

GOREN BRIDGE

The road home

North-South vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from a match between a team from China and a team from Trinidad and Tobago. At the other table, the declarer for Trinidad and Tobago made four hearts after the lead of the ace of spades.

The Chinese declarer at this table got the ace of diamonds lead followed by the queen of diamonds. He won with dummy's king and ran the queen of clubs to West's king. South ruffed the diamond continuation in hand, and cashed the ace of clubs, seeing the 10 fall from West. This was the position

South led the nine of clubs, ruffed by West and over-ruffed with dummy's queen. The defense had to prevail from this point. If South ran the nine of hearts, he would have to ruff a spade to get to his hand.

NORTH
♠ K Q J 8 4 2
♡ Q 9
◇ K 7 3
♣ Q 3

WEST
♠ A 10 9 5
♡ 8
◇ A Q 10 9 8 2
♣ K 10

EAST
♠ 7 6 3
♡ K 7 4 2
◇ J 6
♣ 8 6 5 4

SOUTH
♠ Void
♡ A J 10 6 5 3
◇ 5 4
♣ A J 9 7 2

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1◇	1♠	Pass	2♡
Pass	2♠	Pass	3♣
Pass	3♡	Pass	4♡
All pass			

Opening lead: Ace of ◇

East would lead another spade when he got the lead and South would have two trump losers. Should South overtake the nine of hearts with the 10 and cash the ace, East would have two natural trump winners. The winning play in the given position is to lead a low heart to the queen. East will win but can do no damage.

NORTH
♠ K Q J 8 4 2
♡ Q 9
◇ Void
♣ Void

WEST
♠ A 10 9 5
♡ 8
◇ 9 8 2
♣ Void

EAST
♠ 7 6
♡ K 7 4 2
◇ Void
♣ 8 6

SOUTH
♠ Void
♡ A J 10 6 5
◇ Void
♣ J 9 7

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about the NATO alphabet

Berty Ashley

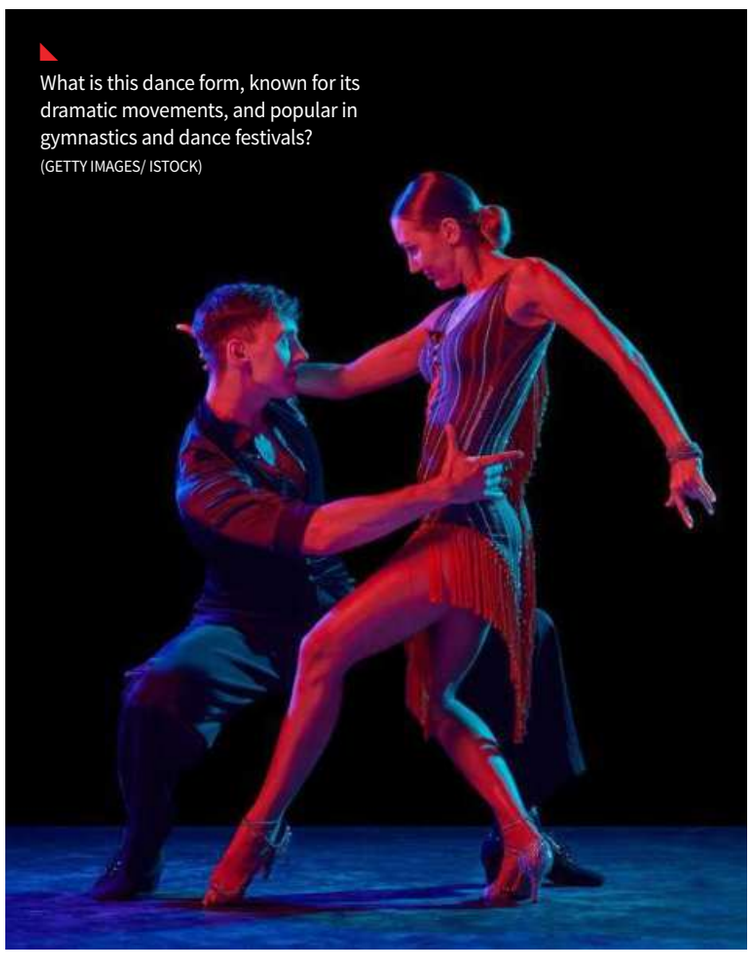
1 The NATO phonetic alphabet is a system that uses specific words to spell out letters. It was developed for use in "military interphones in the intense noise encountered in modern warfare." There is one important profession in which everyone is expected to use this system. Which is this profession that is responsible for the safety of millions of people?

2 Since 2009, a first-person shooter game has been responsible for the NATO alphabet becoming popular with the younger generation. Name the game whose call sign is 'Charlie Oscar Delta'?

3 When the NATO alphabet was developed, a word was considered only if it was commonly used in each of the three most widely spoken languages that use the Latin alphabet. If the first language (the most spoken) is obviously English, what are the other two languages in which the words must have similar spellings?

4 There are only three place names in the NATO alphabet. Lima (the capital of Peru) stands for 'L', and Quebec (Canada's largest province) stands for 'Q'. Which is the only country included in the alphabet?

5 The only character from Greek mythology to appear in the NATO alphabet was a mountain nymph. She was cursed by Hera to repeat only the last words spoken to her, making her unable to tell Narcissus that she loved him. Who was this unfortunate character?



What is this dance form, known for its dramatic movements, and popular in gymnastics and dance festivals?
(GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

6 There are a total of six personal names referenced in the NATO alphabet: Charlie for 'C', Mike for 'M', Oscar for 'O', and Victor for 'V'. This leaves two more, which are usually mentioned as a pair. Made famous by Shakespeare, the only difference is that the girl's name has an extra 't' at the end to ensure correct pronunciation in French. Which two names are these?

7 To ensure correct pronunciation, the words were chosen so that they do not contain accents or punctuation marks. One word, however, is normally written with a hyphen, except in the NATO alphabet, where the hyphen is removed and it is pronounced as a single term. What is this word, the only scientific instrument on the list?

8 There are two art forms referenced in the NATO alphabet. One is Foxtrot for 'F', a smooth dance from the early 1900s. The other represents the letter 'T' and originated in South America. What is this dance form, known for its dramatic movements, and popular in gymnastics and dance festivals?

9 The only sport referenced in the NATO alphabet is of Scottish origin. The first recorded mention of the sport dates back to 1457, when the Scots attempted to ban it because it distracted from military training. What is this sport, said to be a favourite pastime of modern U.S. Presidents?

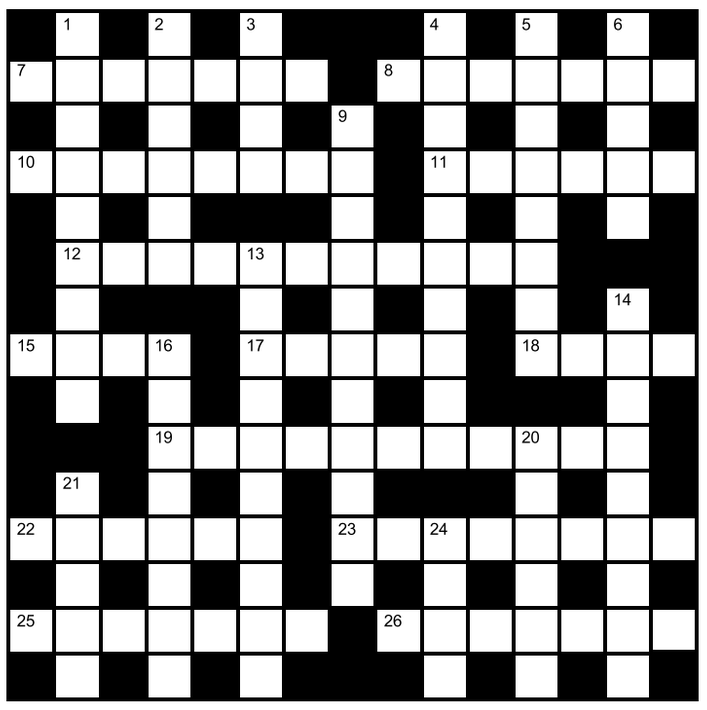
10 This term comes from the Nguni language, means 'heaven,' and refers to a group of people in Africa. They are renowned for their dances, beadwork skills, and music, including the multiple award-winning choral group 'Ladysmith Black Mambazo'. Which people are these, who finish off the NATO alphabet?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Air traffic control
2. Call of Duty
3. Spanish and French
4. India for 'I'
5. Echo for 'E'
6. Romeo for 'R' and Juliett for 'J'
7. Xray for 'X'
8. Tango for 'T'
9. Golf for 'G'
10. Zulu for 'Z'

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 45 (Set by Vidwan)



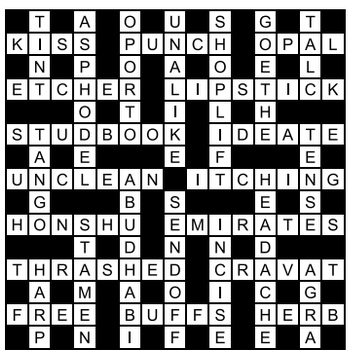
Across

7 Fit and resize loose clothing/uniform (7)
8 Lead planet with incomplete ring of light (7)
10 High heel tilts toe unfortunately (8)
11 Flower had around 51 beads at the centre (6)
12 He's treading unsteadily being myopic! (11)
15 Grouse meat (4)
17 Musical hosted by Billy Rich (5)
18 Heavy Metal guitarist, who plays solos and riffs (4)
19 Buy a steeple, perhaps for rest of grace (6-5)
22 In situ valuation for a small state (6)
23 Scraps of shells covering a button on keyboard (8)
25 Team adopts uniform, one about topping oneself (7)
26 Dream about one acquiring large car company (7)

Down

1 Despatched purchased stolen goods, fellow escapes getting punished (9)
2 Plant a feverish zeal with hint of anarchism (6)
3 To run or to basically jog (4)
4 Gauges small horse cart returning with parasites (10)
5 Old shape, perhaps of a flowering plant (8)
6 Fellow on island, cold and feverish! (5)
9 Spooner's mistake spotters or lyricists (11)
13 Gauls in mad rush for an English salad (10)
14 Epic dream about living in the present (5,4)
16 Following old bunch carrying wife's time piece (8)
20 Mystery topaz, unravelled for top magazine (6)
21 Peaty soil like Arabian dish, millions consumed (5)
24 No European servant for a European (4)

SOLUTION NO. 44



Shailaja Chandra
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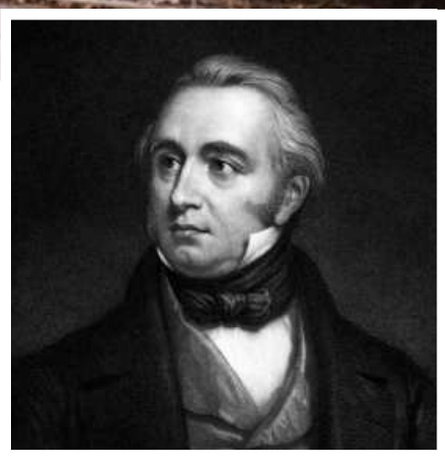
English is a bridge, **not a barrier**

Fluency in the language still matters within corporate, professional circles; in the informal sector, it is a practical tool, not a marker of identity


Thomas Babington Macaulay GETTY IMAGES

The Prime Minister's recent remarks on Macaulay and the "mindset of slavery" have revived an old discomfort many of us have carried but rarely articulated. How much harm did Macaulay do? What did he deprive Indians of? And what mindset changes are needed today?

When Macaulay wrote his famous 9,000-word minute in 1835, the goal of the British government was not to create an education system for the Indian public but to carve out a small English-educated class to assist the administration, interact with British officials, and work as intermediaries. A century later, this experiment produced what critics called "Macaulay's children", though in truth, these were Indians who used English to get things done, not people who lost their Indianness to it.

My parents illustrate this well. A century after Macaulay's minute, they returned to work in British India after higher studies abroad. Even so, they kept a deeply Indian home, shaped by their ancestral roots and family temple in Goa. Regardless of which schools we, their children, attended – elite, missionary, or government – our sense of identity was anchored at home. Indigenous *pathshalas* had continued alongside English-medium schools throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, leaving cultural continuity intact. I too started schooling in a Municipal Marathi School, as my parents valued the mother tongue in early education. Later, I moved to two missionary-run girls' schools, known for instilling discipline, building confidence, and English fluency. Our real learnings came from the Indianness of everyday life, family traditions, stories, festivals, home food, the way one behaved in public. My parents spoke Marathi at home.

The school curricula in the 1950s had serious shortcomings. Almost missing were chapters covering the depth of the Mauryan administration, Chanakya's *Arthashastra*, or the vastness of the Indian state. South Indian history was ignored, leaving us to believe Indian history revolved around Delhi and the Gangetic plains. The focus was on nation building and the freedom struggle, sidelining broader civilisational narratives such as Partition and the trauma of displacement.

While we studied textbooks to pass examinations, English books opened our minds to worlds beyond our everyday experience. Without question, knowledge of English propelled India's breakthroughs in atomic energy, space research, and medicine, all driven by first-generation English-educated scientists who were deeply Indian, but globally competent.

In daily life however, it was, and is even today, natural to speak in the local language. In North India, we who joined the civil services, spoke in Hindi to Ministers, secretariat and field staff, and public visitors. In Maharashtra it was Marathi; in Tamil Nadu, Tamil; in West Bengal, Bengali. Not speaking the State's language was unacceptable and carried costs. Many Tamil officers posted in Maharashtra even mastered idiomatic Marathi to overcome the "outsider" bias.

Not inferior

My contemporaries who joined the universities, medical colleges, and scientific institutions carried no sense of inferiority. English made us all legible to the world, not alienated from ourselves. Because we spoke English well, we could easily speak for India at meetings around the world, needing no interpretation. The ease of transacting professional dialogue with proficiency, far from making us feel "colonised", made us shine.

But it was the next generation – like my children – growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, that became consciously anti-colonial in their reading of history. This shift was not accidental. The NCERT textbooks in the 1970s deliberately placed an emphasis on Indian social reformers, constitutionalism, and regional histories, giving children a more rooted and self-aware education. By the 1990s, children learned Sanskrit compulsorily, read Indian history more fully, and grew up bilingual or trilingual. They travelled on public transport, played cricket in the alleys, and absorbed Indian society in all its layers. Macaulay or no Macaulay, Gen Y developed a flexible identity and the ability to communicate with confidence.

Today, English fluency still matters but remains essential mainly within the corporate and professional circles. In the informal sector, which accounts for 90% of India's workforce, English is just a practical tool, not a marker of identity. Even so, everyone recognises that English fluency advances careers, while the lack of it can hinder progress. Earlier, the lack of exposure to spoken English was attributed to unequal opportunities at home and at school. Now, Gemini and Siri fill those gaps, even as Uber drivers in the Hindi belt prefer hearing route directions in English.

Yet nearly 200 years after Macaulay, there is a new-found eagerness to conflate English usage with colonial loyalty. My contemporaries have begun deriding English conversation – sometimes even within their own families – for being "un-Indian". Coming from those whose professional success rests on English, this is galling. The Prime Minister did not call for the abandonment of English; if his words are misread in that direction, India will harm itself.

Two chasms

Ignorance leading to superiority, not inferiority, lives in two chasms which stay unfilled. Generations of Indians have learnt little about caste oppression. Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar were never taught in my generation or for decades thereafter – leaving me and my children (now in their fifties) blissfully unaware of the cruelty of caste. This gap was not Macaulay's creation. It was (and is) the result of middle-class indifference to face uncomfortable truths.

The second chasm was created by Macaulay by urging the British to end funding for Sanskrit and Arabic as "bounties to raise up champions of error" – a prejudice that delayed Sanskrit's revival for 150 years, erased state support to Arabic, and eventually pushed Urdu – an Indian language born of a Delhi dialect Khari Boli (wrongly conflated with Islam) – into undeserved decline. The purpose of revisiting Macaulay's legacy should not be to manufacture new resentments. English remains a bridge, not a barrier; and without question we must fill the historical and social gaps that Macaulay never created but that our mindsets have allowed to persist. Only if the Prime Minister's words are read as a call to deepen our knowledge of India and shed unnecessary imitation of foreign lifestyles, the outcome will be constructive. That is the only sensible way to interpret the Prime Minister's call.

(Shailaja Chandra was formerly Secretary, Government of India, and Chief Secretary, Delhi)

magazine
THE CLOSET AS INHERITANCE

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Family heirlooms are more than just objects; they carry memories and identity. ('The closet as inheritance'; Feb. 22) By using AI-generated stories, we can document their histories, engage younger generations, and preserve emotional value for the future. Thoughtful storytelling can transform silent treasures into living legacies that connect past, present and future.
N.S. Reddy

Heirlooms commemorate generations, old memories and family history. They remind us of ancestors, festivals and other special occasions. The almirah holds a special place in the family home.
K.M.K. Murthy

Accumulating and preserving priceless old items is a blessing in disguise to revive nostalgia for our loved ones. However, due to space constraint, we discard precious commodities in the name of decluttering. Little do we know that old things help us remember the good old days.
Ratna Naidu

Engaging read

Deepa Anappara's interview was an insightful exploration of imperialism. ('Mapping imperialism'; Feb. 22) Her perspective highlighted the oppressive structure that shaped social hierarchies. As in *Waiting for Godot*, the fluidity of human identity, with the historical setting of the book, was relatable.
Beena Anil

Human at the centre

The article exposes the fallacy that AI is the elixir for everything in the future. ('My scoop at AI Impact Summit'; Feb. 22) There are fundamental flaws that need to be addressed. Human factor should be the prime concern in the adoption of new technology.
N. Sadasivan Pillai

Care for caregivers

It is oxymoronic that ASHA workers, who render incomparable service to rural folks, get scant attention from the authorities and society at large. ('ASHA's mental health paradox,' Feb. 22) At the cost of their safety and health, they did stellar work during the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing hope and cheer to people in several far-flung areas when the nation was in lockdown.
Ayyasseri Raveendranath

ASHAs have been performing their tough job very efficiently despite their low pay, which is less than the minimum wage mandated by the Labour Ministry. Dealing with patients with mental health issues is not an easy job. Government should take care of their well being.
Navin Katyal

A beautiful bond

The bond between India and France goes beyond politics and business as it also encompasses art, culture and a shared respect for tradition. ('India, France and a common thread'; Feb. 22) The influence of traditional Indian designs on European fashion highlights how deeply connected we are. It is inspiring to appreciate the beautiful common thread that links the Indian soul with French style.
Sajna Hameed

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The many languages of the horn
Perhaps it has become a substitute for conversation in a world short on patience
Vivek Gundimi

A declining hobby
Any collection that does not have the potential to earn money is now not considered to be worth collecting
Vijay Shekhar

As fleeting as snowflakes
They remind one of the nature of time and mortality
Sujatha Rao

Take up a job you love
Then, you will never have to work daily in your life
Lakshmi Srinivas

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There is no elbow room anywhere

Balasubramaniam Pavani
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Modern lifestyle has everything one can aspire to. However, one thing that can bother everyone is the lack of "space".

Space comes at a premium and has become a luxury as well. Space constraints are not just restricted to outdoors, it starts from one's home. Gone are the days when household essentials and articles were heavy and known for durability. Durability was the main requirement then. Those were the days of huge and heavy household needs. Rooms were big and huge, and there were storerooms which could hold items that would be sparingly used. Each house would have a sit-out where people could sit and chat comfortably.

Today a 2 BHK is a classic example of lives being lived in shrunken space. Just a cot leaves the bedroom with no space.

While the population has increased by leaps and bounds, the fact is that luxuries are becoming a necessity. A moderation that will help is grossly missing. Isn't it an irony that despite huge advancements in lifestyles, lives are lived for survival and not peacefully? Even playgrounds and open spaces have now become a rarity.

Wish list of an octogenarian

Vivek K. Agnihotri
vkagnihotri25@gmail.com

Life is running on a single engine at present, but the spirit is still willing

Sometimes, when I look around, I wish I belonged to Gen Z. I would then be digitally active and more tech-savvy, diverse, purpose-driven, and anxious. I would also be more socially conscious with preference for visual communication apps such as TikTok and Instagram. I could also just go out on to the streets to protest. A protest against what? I really don't know. Perhaps to register frustration with my life. I wish I could wander aimlessly in malls.

I wish I could go back in life, just a little. I wish I could get six or seven hours of uninterrupted deep sleep at night, and not feel sleepy during the day. Get up early in the morning for a brisk walk. Come back and read the newspaper leisurely over a cup of tea.

Have a relaxed breakfast a little later, followed by a snooze, perhaps. Get ready and sit at my desktop to regularly punch in an article. But that is not easy now with failing eyesight. I wish I could develop a new hobby consistent with my age and physical condition. I wish I got more phone calls from relatives and friends than spams and frauds. I also wish that my calls to friends and relatives did not go to voice mail, never to be returned.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

I wish I could watch, in old-style dim-lit single theatres, classics such as *Come September*, *Roman Holiday*, *Ben-Hur*, and *My Fair Lady*; as well as all-time great Bollywwod movies such as *Mother India*, *Awara*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Sangam*, *Aradhana*, *Guide*, *Anand*, and *Veer Zara*.

I wish to sit listening endlessly to iconic songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar, Asha Bhosle, Manna Dey, Jagjit Singh. Not to forget Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Jim Reeves, Joan Baez, Beatles, Stevie Wonder.

I wish to re-read some of the classics, both fiction and non-fiction, such as the works of Premchand, Sharad Chandra, Mahadevi Verma, Jaishankar Prasad, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Wordsworth, Carlisle, Byron, and Tennyson. I wish I could also read all those books which I always wanted to, but could not do so now on account of failing eyesight.

Full house

I wish our home had members of various generations, rather than just two octogenarians. While the younger ones would keep us entertained with their antics, the older ones would help us with some of our chores. They would force us out of home quite willingly and take us to places we have not been to before. There will be song, dance and some drama to make life more liveable.

I wish we had some more houses in the neighbourhood we could visit than the standard few pitstops.

I wish I could also restore and reignite old relationships and friendships to their pristine purity, the cheerful abandon of which has gone away on account of time, distances, and misunderstandings.

Life is running on a single engine at present; but the spirit is still willing. I wish the flesh too was equally strong.

Experimental (Clockwise from below) Studio Biskt's Masa table; Exodus II at Gallerie Scene Ouverte; Nadi table at Shakti Design Residency; Æquo's Tavit armchair; and Jellyfish Chandelier at Alexis de Ducla International. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

FUNCTION AS FINE ART

Inside ID Salon, proof that design collectibles are finding a strong foothold in the country

Ritika Kochhar

India has long embraced collectibles. For instance, among the treasures excavated in Pompeii (after Mount Vesuvius' eruption in 79 CE) was an ivory Yakshini statuette, also called Pompeii Lakshmi, which showed how *early* global trade had tapped into it.

But today, the country is widening its outlook. There's a clear shift from traditional collectibles, which stressed rarity (think silver statues and intricate carpets), to architectural and design pieces with authorship and enduring value. The recent Design section at India Art Fair underlined this, as did the first edition of ID Salon, part of the just-concluded India Design ID in New Delhi.

Among the participating galleries were Æquo, the Mumbai-based craft-led platform; Galerie Scene Ouverte, a designer initiative from Paris; Alexis de Ducla International, a curator-led platform for furniture, textiles, and *objets d'art*; and Shakti Design Residency, which connects global designers with Indian craftspeople and ateliers (think Tarun Tahiliani, and Klove Studio).

Contemporary authorship

The 'Vista Collection' of glass furniture and lights, a collab between New York-based designer Kickie Chudikova and Klove Studio (for Shakti Design Residency), turned heads with its concentric layered glass pieces. Inspired by the multifoil arches of Mughal architecture, each had a glowing central core that illuminated the whole and merged art with functional lighting. "As an Indian architect and designer, I've been working with a lot of Indian ateliers and artisans. I wanted to tell their story and find innovative ways to display their work," says Shalini Misra, who conceived Shakti Design Residency.

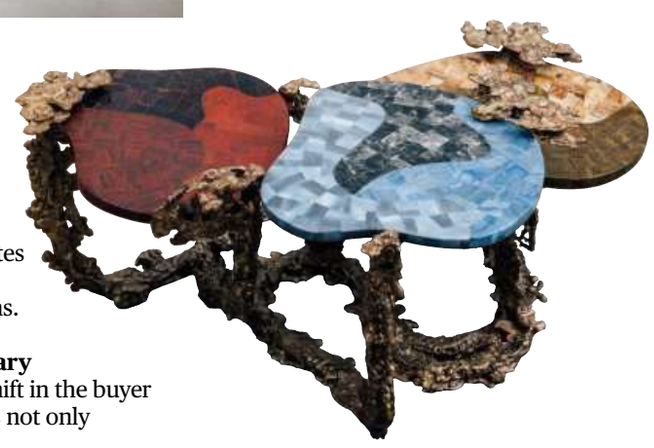
At Æquo, I spotted wall hangings covered in *zardozi* and lounge chairs with cushions made of woven stalks. Alexis de Ducla showcased woven leather works by Ateliers Courtin and draped textile installations using Dedar fabrics. And at Galerie Scene Ouverte, pop art blown glass vases were dramatic and experimental. "Design collectibles are becoming important to art buyers because they combine authorship, rarity, and use in a way few other categories do," states fair director and curator Misha Bains.

A porous boundary

Bains is seeing a shift in the buyer market: it includes not only established collectors, legacy families and patrons of the arts, but also entrepreneurs, second-generation collectors, and globally exposed professionals. And what she observes them asking for is authorship (who the designer is and what the studio stands for), material and craft stories, exclusivity with functionality, and cultural relevance.

Provenance matters too. "In the Indian context, provenance is less about historical age and more about editioning [limited series of identicals], and the documentation and credibility of the gallery or designer. That is what builds trust in a growing market like ours," she says. Design studios such as Vikram Goyal, Ashiesh Shah and Rooshad Shroff that have long exhibited at platforms such as India Art Fair, have already signalled the porous boundary between art and design. The question now is whether the appetite for collectible design is strong enough for global galleries to establish a deeper presence in India – particularly at a time when importing furniture can attract duties of 40%-50% more.

The writer is an expert on South Asian art and culture.



Take a seat

What can a chair tell you about India? Quite a lot, according to a new exhibition

Anisha Menezes

At the House of Mahendra Doshi's Wadala showroom, a 43-foot mural takes up an entire wall. In tones of sepia and gold, it picks out different chairs, regions, and architectural styles to illustrate India's seating design lineage – setting the tone for its new exhibition, *A History of India through Chairs*. "I wanted to show how cultural context and history shaped chairs," explains Vivek Gandhi, who conceptualised the exhibition in Mumbai, which has been curated by his father Anand Gandhi and uncle Chiki Doshi.

"In the mural, we depict how pre-colonial seating had low *khatts* [cots], *jhulas* [swings], and low *khursis* for royal *baithaks* [gatherings]. Then, the Portuguese introduced elevated seating," he adds. "The Dutch brought the burgomaster [a 17th-19th century teak chair with a circular cane seat and six legs], and the English their planter chairs."

A collection of 50 years

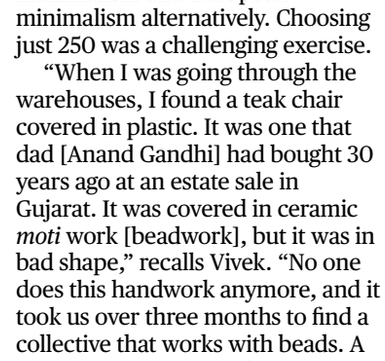
The House, with the country's largest curation of antiques, *objets d'art* and collectibles, knows its chairs. Their collection, started by Mahendra Doshi 52 years ago (and added to later by the family), has over 3,000 chairs – collected from across Gujarat, Goa, Rajasthan, Kerala, West Bengal, among other locations. It also includes pre- and post-Independence models such as the streamlined Art Deco chair, the Jeanneret chair, and modern avatars that embrace Indian maximalism and European minimalism alternatively. Choosing just 250 was a challenging exercise.

"When I was going through the warehouses, I found a teak chair covered in plastic. It was one that dad [Anand Gandhi] had bought 30 years ago at an estate sale in Gujarat. It was covered in ceramic *moti* work [beadwork], but it was in bad shape," recalls Vivek. "No one does this handwork anymore, and it took us over three months to find a collective that works with beads. A 78-year-old *Ba* [honorific for an elderly Gujarati woman] was able to do the recladding. The restoration took close to eight months."

Read the full story on magazine.thehindu.com.

The exhibition is on till March 8 at Mahendra Doshi, Wadala, Mumbai.

The freelance writer is based in Chennai.



Story of the *desi* chair (Clockwise from left) Anglo Indian throne chair; Art Deco lounge chair; Bishop's chair with Ashoka emblem. (HASHIM BADANI AND VIVEK GANDHI)

IAF'S COLLECTIBLE AMBITION

As audiences become more globally exposed, art is shaping furniture and objects — as seen at the art fair's Design section

Gayatri Rangachari Shah

At India Art Fair (IAF) Design, architect Kunal Maniar's *Love Bench*, a 21-foot, 3,000 kg sculptural metal piece with a bolster made of water hyacinth and banana pulp fibre, had guests pausing. Elsewhere, *Bloom*, a chandelier by designer Dhruv Agarwwal explored nostalgia and childlike curiosity through colourful Channapatna beads, with a colour palette inspired by his visit to the Kumbh *mela*.

Bigger, bolder, and more expansive than ever before, the design section, now in its third year, featured 14 Indian studios and two international design galleries. "What began as a focused introduction has grown into a space that foregrounds craft-based practices, material intelligence, and cross-disciplinary thinking," explains Jaya Asokan, the fair's director. "Each year, we've seen deeper engagement – from audiences, institutions, and practitioners – affirming that design is not peripheral to the art conversation but very much part of it."

Overlap between art and design

Design is at an inflection point in India today. Besides being a distinctive commercial category at the art fair, 2026 saw a delegation from Salone del Mobile, the world's premier Milanese design fair, visiting the country during IAF, and events such as India Design ID following soon after. Expanding infrastructure – with dedicated exhibitions, collectible design galleries, residencies, and a growing base of informed collectors – underlines this structural shift.

And designers are responding: Vikram Goyal's more accessible label, Viya, opened a Mumbai store last week, underscoring growing confidence in the domestic market. At IAF Design, several participants, including Galerie Maria Wettergren (France), Kunal Maniar (Mumbai), Kohelika Kohli Karkhana (New Delhi), and Morii Design (Gujarat), were presenting for the first time.

"The art fair's evolution from a purely art-focused platform to one that acknowledges the strong overlap between art and design mirrors the way the world is thinking today," says Kohelika Kohli, CEO of the multidisciplinary design atelier. "As audiences become more globally exposed and culturally informed, art is no longer confined to walls; it shapes furniture, objects and entire environments."

Welcome shift (Clockwise from left) Rooshad Shroff's booth; designs by Gunjan Gupta; and *Bloom* by Dhruv Agarwwal. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Bespoke designs

Mumbai-based architect-designer Rooshad Shroff believes design needs its own space, and that the growing number of platforms is good news. "I see India's luxury landscape shifting away from overt branding and large-scale production, gravitating instead towards the handcrafted and the bespoke," says the founder of the boutique firm RooshadSHROFF, whose installations at IAF used stone, metal and fine textiles, including his first exploration of upholstered furniture.

New York-based multi-disciplinary artist Ghiora Aharoni's practice treats objects as vessels of memory. His presented works centred on Zamrud, an emerald reliquary in brass, as well as wall sculptures in Hindru, his invented visual language (that merges Hindi and Urdu). Across mediums, he blurred categories: art and design, object and text. He says visitors were extremely curious and knowledgeable, and that the reception to his work was "extraordinary".

Product designer Gunjan Gupta's research-driven practice questioned India's relationship with the chair – using vases, baskets and stools in innovative ways. "The future of collectible design will reward integrity of process, collaboration and ideas that hold their ground over time," she says.

Space for more

But is there really room for design at an art fair? There are some who wonder. As culture writer Gautami Reddy recently wrote in a piece for digital platform *Ocula*, "Art and design sharing the same platform was a recurring topic of conversation [at the art fair] and an obvious source of discomfort. 'It's probably a money decision,' someone said."

But others are keeping an open mind. "In recent years, art fairs have started making space for art historical material. Now that design seems to have found a footing too, it will be interesting to see whether its own histories will begin to be presented in a similar way," says gallerist Mortimer Chatterjee of Chatterjee & Lal.

In a world of increasing intersectionality, can't art and design sit side by side? After all, design booths are often an opening for first-time buyers to access works, and a gateway into the larger world of art.

Read the full story on magazine.thehindu.com

The writer is a Mumbai-based journalist and author.